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SUBJECT: JULY 26 BY-ELECTIONS: URI PARTY CONTINUES ITS
DOWNWARD SPIRAL

Classified By: CDA Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Out of the four National Assembly seats contested yesterday, the ruling Uri Party zeroed out again; the main opposition GNP won three and the minor opposition Democratic Party won one seat. The Democratic Party victory was particularly depressing for President Roh, as the victor, Chough Soon-Hyung, was a rabid Roh tormentor who had led the "impeach Roh movement" two years ago. In fact, Chough ran his campaign under the slogan "you should've listened to me."

This defeat, coming on the heels of Uri's disastrous performance in the May 31 regional elections, will strengthen the demand of Uri Party members to distance themselves from President Roh. END SUMMARY

Total Loss for Uri, Again

¶12. (SBU) Once again, the ruling Uri Party lost big. Since seizing control of the Assembly in parliamentary elections in 2004, the Uri Party has failed to win a single seat in three successive by-elections. In April, 2005 by-elections, the GNP won five of six seats, in October, 2005, the GNP swept the four seats and finally July 26 the Uri Party suffered another humiliating defeat as they failed to come close in any of the four races. The GNP won seats in Masan, Bucheon and Songpa-gu in Seoul with convincing victories in all three races bringing their seat total in the Assembly to 126. The lowest voter turnout in history of 25 percent was attributed to the rain and low interest. The results show a complete loss of support for the President and the ruling party.

¶13. (SBU) The by-elections in April, 2005 replaced six Uri lawmakers who were dismissed for election violations and the three successive by-election losses by the Uri Party have left them with 142 seats out of 299. Less than the necessary majority to pass any law, the current balance leaves the ruling party powerless to enact its agenda. Coupled with polling results that show as low as 15 percent approval rating for the president, the Uri Party's woes continue to deepen. Several key Uri Party officials told poloff that the loss reinforces what they already knew, the Uri Party needs to change.

"CHOUGH DRAMA"

¶14. (C) The GNP nearly swept the July 26 by-election by gaining three out of the four seats. The big upset, however,

was in the Songbuk district of Seoul, where the Democratic Party candidate Chough Soon-hyung, affectionately dubbed "Mr. Caustic Voice" defeated his main opponent Choi Su-young by securing 45 percent of the votes. GNP candidate Choi enjoyed a comfortable lead over Chough until days before the election when a local GNP official was caught golfing in disaster-struck Gangwon province while search and rescue operations were still ongoing. The official has since been dismissed. GNP Supreme Council Member Kwon Young-se told poloff that the GNP's decisive response to the scandal should improve the GNP's image and that, despite the loss of the seat, he was happy the Uri Party failed to garner a seat.

¶15. (SBU) The seventy-year-old Chough was the leader of the faction that sought to impeach President Roh in 2003. After the impeachment failed, Chough was voted out of the Assembly and has been out of politics since 2004. Chough said he felt his retribution was as if he had been, "dismissed for giving good advice to the King and now had been raised up again." In addition to Chough's leadership in the impeachment process, he also was aided in his campaign by his clean image, conservative-leaning views, and regionalism. Independent JoongAng Ilbo reports that nearly 50 percent of the residents of Songbuk Eul claim birthplace or familial ties to the DP stronghold in the southwest Honam region. GNP lawmaker Chon Yu-ok told poloff the DP victory shows simply that people detest President Roh and they supported Chough only because he pushed for Roh's impeachment. Presidential hopeful Goh Kun noted that, "We should look to Chough for an example," as the country moves forward. The DP victory boosts the party and increases the chances that Goh will join the DP as their presidential candidate.

GNP

¶16. (C) GNP officials were somewhat defensive about their loss in Songbuk, eager to show that it had nothing to do with the new leadership of the party. While GNP Chairman Kang Jae-sup's aide noted that he considered the loss a disappointment, it does not mean a new direction is needed within the GNP. The GNP's two main presidential candidates Park Geun-hye and Lee Myung-bak still remain well positioned for their 2007 run.

URI-DP ALLIANCE?

¶17. (C) For the Uri Party, the election was a clear and undeniable indicator of its complete loss of public support, especially among its traditional support base in the Honam region. To this effect, Uri Party representative Yoo Jay-kun's advisor told poloff there is a heightened sense of panic within the party. Key observers note the jockeying between the DP and Uri Parties will intensify because of the result and realignment could occur at the end of 2006. The result probably eliminated any slim hopes Uri Chairman Kim Geun-tae might have had for a successful run for the Uri nomination.

COMMENT

¶18. (C) Some skeptics worry that President Roh will not take the result to heart as a condemnation of his policies and personnel choices. Roh's stubbornness could cause not only a turbulent fall Assembly session, it could spell real problems for any candidate with ties to the Uri Party. Many Uri lawmakers want to flee their party, but they will likely wait out the fall assembly session to bolt. The implications are serious, but likely to be ignored by the President who, after being elected on a populist platform is carving out a legacy of ignoring the voice of the people and even his own supporters.

YUN